

# *Egopolitics* as “Order”: The Bolsonarist Violence in Pandemic Times

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**ABSTRACT** In this article, I introduce egopolitics as an essential concept for understanding Bolsonarist discourse, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Egopolitics is a specific type of political behaviour in which politics is ostensibly used for private interests on behalf of one person or group. Instead of other forms of dealing privately with politics, like corruption, egopolitics is not necessarily perceived as illegal behaviour. In this sense, egopolitics competes daily with traditional politics, the latter understood as a political attitude towards the public interest. By saying this, I argue that Jair Bolsonaro rules Brazil based on egopolitics. To highlight such a private form that Bolsonaro deals with politics, I discuss the violent way in which his government has been dealing with the coronavirus pandemic and the catastrophic consequences of this egopolitical behaviour.

This article attempts to analyse the catastrophic and violent way in which the Brazilian government and its President, Jair Bolsonaro, have been dealing with the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. As is well-known, Brazil is the second most affected country by the disease so far: over 160,000 people have lost their lives. Such an enormous number of deaths cannot be seen simply as a health tragedy, but the result of decisions taken by the Brazilian government since COVID-19 was considered a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). The Brazilian President’s behaviour has been revealing he is in denial regarding the pandemic and, as a result, has been negligent towards his citizens. Such behaviour is directly correlated with the dramatic consequences experienced by the country so far.

There have been many analyses on Bolsonaro’s government and also, in a broader sense, about Bolsonarism. I decided to approach Bolsonarism and his election as part of a far-right populist discourse. Such an obvious statement announces that the majority of Brazilian voters chose him and the

exclusionary discourse that he represents. Even though Bolsonaro's campaign used fake news on a large-scale, utilising multiple social media platforms, in many ways he has never deceived the voters. Nobody is surprised by his hate speech against feminism, black people, the left, and other progressive movements; and people have long been aware that Bolsonaro is a truculent and authoritarian person.

Nonetheless, there is another characteristic of Bolsonaro that has not been so evident to the voters, and that has only been revealed after the inauguration of his government: his "*egopolitics*". *Egopolitics* is the name I have chosen to specify a type of behaviour that I shall explain as a personalistic way of taking political decisions. Being an *egopolitician* is to be someone who ostensibly despises the institutions, laws, and constituted rules. Bolsonaro is an *egopolitician*, and the *egopolitical* way in which he has been dealing with the pandemic has been catastrophic for Brazilians.

To achieve this, I have divided the analysis into three main sections. First, I discuss the theoretical background, particularly the concepts of *egopolitics* and populism. Second, I explain the way I analyse the Bolsonarist phenomenon and its conditions of possibility. Finally, I analyse the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic in Brazil and how Bolsonarism has been responsible for dramatically worsening it.

### ***Egopolitics* and Populism**

Before I explain the concepts of *egopolitics* and populism, I would like to anticipate that this investigation is premised upon Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 2005a), which has been exhaustively discussed at length (e.g. Smith 1998; Torfing 1999; Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000; Critchley and Marchart 2004). In this sense, Bolsonarism is here analysed as a discourse, which according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), is the result of a process of articulation amongst heterogeneous elements or demands. The way in which these elements have been articulated will be explained in the next section.

Having anticipated the theoretical background that guides this analysis, I now turn my attention to what I mean by *egopolitics*. First, it is essential to explain the root of this category, which has its origin in the classical Greek elaboration regarding tyranny. It is not my goal to establish a homology between *egopolitics* and tyranny, mostly because the first is not a constitution as is the second. The point of contact between them is the core of what it is to be tyrannical. This core is defined as the deviation of monarchy: "tyranny is the monarchy for the benefit of the monarch" (Aristotle 1992: 1279b4), understanding the monarch as "the rule of one".

Such a simple concept is consequently followed by a negative unanimity amongst political philosophers regarding tyranny. This constitution is considered the worst in comparison to other ones. The reason is that the tyrant is someone who rules for oneself, which indicates a political deviation. According to Aristotle (1992: 1279a32), a right constitution aims at the common interest or still the "best for the state and all its members".

Tyranny is not the only deviation in constitution; it is accompanied by oligarchy and democracy. Nonetheless, tyranny is the only constitution where the deviation benefits only one individual. In this

sense, tyranny is the best example, from Ancient Greece, of politics as a private matter: the fundamental feature of *egopolitics*.

It seems counterintuitive to think on politics also as a private matter. Politics is the human dimension regarding the public interest. It is well established that political decisions affect all citizens of a state. However, one needs to differentiate “the public interest” from “the range of a political decision”. Which of them is inherently part of politics? Take into consideration what I have written about tyranny (a tyrant’s action considers solely his/her interest) and disregard, at the same time, the fact that such action affects the city as a whole. A tyranny then, even aiming at a private interest, is still a constitution: a (private) way of ruling the state. Therefore, politics may be a private matter that has its effects on the public.

Therefore, there is no necessarily public essence for politics if tyranny is part of the political world. When we speak about politics, taking into consideration the public interest, it is the result of an ethical decision that was taken at the dawn of the Western political philosophy, mostly from Plato and Aristotle’s texts. The moment when politics became a philosophical matter and not just a practical one, in the sense of how to rule human communities, was the very moment when politics became, ethically speaking, a public matter. This is so evident for Aristotle that he divided the six constitutions into two categories, the “right constitutions” (monarchy, aristocracy, and polity) and their corresponding “deviations” (tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy).

Since the Greeks, an essential concern in the history of political philosophy has been not only to focus the philosophical imagination on the best constitutions to rule the people and states but also to highlight that the constitution protects the state and the individuals from the private interests. Over time, private interests have been called many names, such as tyranny, corruption, patrimonialism, and the privatisation of the state. In so doing, one may say that the great merit of the Greek political philosophy was not to solve the practical matters of politics, which they seem to have no solution to, but to identify them.

Today, I believe we have been living a new experience on how to deal with politics privately, one which I name *egopolitics*. The necessity of a new name for a personalistic political situation has its origin in the very political circumstances that have dramatically changed over the last few decades in the Western democracies.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, *egopolitics* is different from, for example, corruption and patrimonialism, as *egopolitics* has not necessarily been perceived as something negative by citizens.

What do I mean by *egopolitics*? What are its main differences regarding other forms of dealing with politics privately? First, as I anticipated, *egopolitics* is not a type of political regime nor any organised political system. Rather it is a particularistic political behaviour that any politician may assume. *Egopolitics* is literally “private”, that is, such an action like this is intended only for one person or for a particular group of people, not for everyone as ethically one expects from any political action.

The main difference between *egopolitics* and the already mentioned forms of political privatisation is that the first is a specific type of political behaviour which competes with the traditional politics on a daily basis. In other words, the supporters of a politician with such *egopolitical* behaviour do not see him/her as a corrupt. For instance, while a practice of corruption necessarily occurs “on the sly”, once it is legally prohibited, *egopolitical* practices may happen openly.

*Egopolitics* directly competes with traditional politics and it is crucial to make the latter clear in order to highlight another *egopolitical* characteristic. By traditional politics, I mean what currently one presumes to be the correct political behaviour, that one oriented to the political community as a whole. In this sense, traditional politics regularly retrieves and reminds the ethical commitment from the Greek philosophical past, in which politics aims necessarily at the common interest. In opposition, *egopolitical* practices are openly directed towards “the good citizens” or “the chosen ones”. In other words, an *egopolitician* rules not for all, but, as a new type of political deviation, just for a few.

Considering the reasons above, *egopolitics* may not be seen as a kind of anti-politics, if by anti-politics one understands the denial of the political institutions. The attitude of denying them (e.g. parliaments or political parties) remains being a political action, mostly because of the public consequences resulting from this damaging behaviour. Hence, *egopolitics*, while denying and defying the institutions, introduces an alternative way of dealing with politics. Such a way comes from the fantasy that volunteerism and spontaneity of good-willed people (in contrast to the corrupted institutions) are seen as appropriate responses to political issues. In so doing, *egopolitics* is not only a kind of political behaviour directed to the “the chosen ones” but also a promise of a spontaneous way to deal with political matters that defy ordinary institutions. That is the moment in which one has to introduce another crucial political phenomenon of our time that has a close connection to *egopolitics*: populism.

Populism is a contested concept and, considering most of the political discourse, also a pejorative one. I do not want to discuss the controversies around the term as I have no intention to get into such endless discussion. My point here is only to present how “the people” are politically constructed within a populist discourse and to argue towards the specificity of the far-right populism and the relation of this populist experience to *egopolitics*.

In the context of this article, populism is a type of political construction which divides the social space between two antagonistic discourses, “the people” and their “enemies”. This concept is mostly inspired by Laclau’s (2005a; 2005b) account of populism, despite the differences that I shall soon indicate.

The first element to highlight is the meaning of “political construction” in a populist experience. It means that there are no pre-existing people or enemies in a populist formation. The people are not the number of inhabitants of a country nor a particular social group within a society, such as the working-class. The people are necessarily a political construction which depends on specific conditions of emergence which are always contingent and precarious. In so doing, neither the people nor their enemies have any pre-existing social essence.

Antagonism is the crucial element for such contingent discursive formations. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), antagonism constitutes political identities in a negative way. In this sense, there is only politics because of such negativity. Political discourse arises because of the presence of this antagonistic pole. According to the authors, antagonism, “as a witness of the impossibility of final suture, is the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125). Hence, it is the antagonistic menace, initially perceived as unsatisfied/frustrated demands by the institutional system (Laclau 2005a), the reason for the emergence of an articulatory process among such demands that will divide the political space into the people against their enemies.

The concept of populism I have just presented, as mentioned, is mostly inspired by Laclau's account, but there is an essential difference from my perspective, and now is the moment to highlight it. To be even more precise, the difference is not only related to Laclau's theory. My view is dissonant vis-à-vis the majority of post-structuralist and even liberal accounts on populism. It is about who the people are at an ontological level.

Following Laclau, I argue that the people are the result of an always contingent and precarious political construction. Such a structure has to be understood as part of a broader post-foundational argument, mostly inspired by Heidegger's ontology, presented in Laclau's theory of the political (Laclau 2014; Marchart 2007). According to this ontological perspective, there is no essence at the level of Being, and because of this, there are unlimited possibilities for the constitution of beings at the ontic level.

Translating it into political grammar, it is impossible to forecast how any political identity will be constituted. Based on this impossibility, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have built a theoretical approach in which categories such as the practice of articulation, antagonism, and hegemony may only be understood in such a context of a Heideggerian non-foundational ontology.

Now, let us look at Laclau's theory of populism considering the ontological presuppositions I have just presented. For him, "populism is an ontological and not an ontic category — i.e. its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content" (Laclau 2005b: 34). It is because of such a non-foundational ontology that Laclau affirms that his account on populism may be used in order to comprehend the most different populist experiences, regardless of any ideology associated with each case considered for analysis.

However, in my view, there is at least an essentialist trace in Laclau's theory of populism that needs to be eliminated. Such a remnant concerns how the author deals with the people. According to Laclau (2005b: 38), "Equivalential discourses divide [...] the social into two camps: power and the underdog". "The underdog" is the form that the author qualifies "the people". "Underdog" presupposes "the people" necessarily as weaker and/or poorer than the rest of society and such a particular qualification is what I call the essentialist trace present in Laclau's theory of populism.

There is no necessity to regard the people simply as the underdog. In doing this, even considering that the signifier 'underdog' itself is not linked to any specific ontic description, one takes the people as the weaker and/or more impoverished part of society. However, a people's construction does not necessarily have to occur from this underdog articulation. What really makes a political articulation populist is the specific construction of the people and not the qualification of the people *as* underdog.

If we take a post-foundationalist ontological background seriously, we have to assume the possibility of different configurations beyond "the people as underdog" for populist formations. It should be enough to presuppose the existence of a populist articulation based on an antagonist threat or even caused by the perception of injustice. Such danger or injustice does not necessarily have to articulate the people as the weakest or lowest part of society.

This is what is happening in the case of Bolsonarism. The construction of the people within the Bolsonarist discourse took place not from the position of underdog, but initially from a resentful and outraged middle class after fourteen years of Workers Party (PT) governments.

## How Bolsonaro Became a Reality

This section characterises the Bolsonarist discourse and starts with the conditions of its emergence. Bolsonarism, a far-right populism, would not exist without the Lulism that preceded it. In other words, the Bolsonarist discourse has been an authoritarian response to the left governments of Lula and Rousseff (2003-2014). It is not my objective in this article to explain the Lulist phenomenon nor the fourteen years of the PT administrations.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, as Lulism has been the antagonist pole for Bolsonarism, it is fundamental to outline at least some crucial elements of this left discursive experience.

Lulism, as a political phenomenon, emerged silently during Lula's first Presidential mandate (2003-2006). According to the political scientist André Singer (2012), who first outlined the Lulist phenomenon and also coined the term, "Lulism" is "the meeting of a leadership, that of Lula, with a fraction of class, the sub proletariat, through the program whose main points were outlined between 2003 and 2005: combating poverty" (Singer 2012:15). In other words, Lulism was a way through which poor people identified themselves with Lula's social policies that were implemented by the PT governments to combat hunger and misery (mostly the Fome Zero Program), which are two of the most historically important issues for millions of Brazilians. Furthermore, the PT administrations were also responsible for other policies aiming at the inclusion of vulnerable people in several areas, such as education, housing, energy, and infrastructure.

Nevertheless, Lulism was not only "made" by social policies, having, according to Singer (2012), another central element to be considered. While the poor have become increasingly linked to the PT, corruption scandals involving PT resulted in the party's loss of support from the middle class, which traditionally voted for the PT since the end of the 1980s. Within this context, the PT became the party of the poor whereas the main opposition party, the Social Brazilian Democracy Party (PSDB), consolidated its position as the political alternative for the middle and upper classes.

Lulist social policies were supported by the economic boom that Brazil experienced mostly during the first decade of this century. Boosted by increasing demand from China for Brazilian commodities, the country saw substantial economic growth, which was crucial for several social policies implemented primarily for the poor. In this respect, the PT governments established a Lulist electoral base which was crucial, after the first Lula's mandate, for a further three consecutive electoral victories: Lula's re-election in 2006 and Dilma Rousseff's election and re-election in 2010 and 2014 respectively.

The combination of consistent economic growth over a decade with these social policies was the main reason, not only for the rise, but also for the success of Lulism. From the two Lula mandates to the first half of the Rousseff government, corruption denounces were not enough to jeopardise the Lulist hegemony. However, the Brazilian political scenario changed from mid-2013, when the first signs of economic crisis appeared. Such a crisis, caused mainly by the commodities crisis in the international market, triggered a set of events that undermined the Rousseff government.

First, between mid-June and mid-July 2013, the country witnessed massive protests against the political system as a whole, called "June 2013". In the beginning of the protests, the main demands

(mostly from the ‘underdogs’) were for better public services, such as transportation, health, security, among others.

However, as the days passed, the scenario changed, and “June 2013” was the starting point for the emergence of new right and far-right movements against the PT government and Lulism. Along with these new movements from the middle classes, a new political subject has emerged: the “good citizen”. The “good citizen” is white, well-educated, and a member of the middle or upper classes. His/her primary demands were against political corruption and, even considering that corruption covers all the main political parties, he/she blamed only the PT for it. The “good citizen” discourse against corruption was the chief demand for Rousseff’s impeachment and also for Bolsonaro’s election.

Second, two events further undermined Lulism in 2014. First, a major corruption scandal during the PT governments, the “Petrolão” (“Big Oil”) scandal was revealed, through a criminal investigation called “Operation Car Wash”. This operation, which continues even today, has been investigating frauds in bidding processes at Petrobras oil company, involving construction companies, politicians, political parties, and public servants.

The second event was the 2014 Presidential campaign when Rousseff ran for re-election. At that moment, Brazil was going through a difficult time, with profound political and economic crises; and the preliminary results of the Operation Car Wash were exploited by the opposition. After a fierce electoral campaign, Rousseff was re-elected with a small margin of victory over her opponent, Aécio Neves (PSDB).<sup>3</sup>

However, one may say that Rousseff’s re-election was somehow a Pyrrhic victory. It is not an exaggeration to state that she did not have enough political support to rule during the two years of her second mandate until her impeachment on 31 October 2016. That was not only due to the economic crisis and the corruption scandals, but also because of the emergence of the new right and far-right movements that organised several protests clamouring for the President’s impeachment - mainly alleging corrupt practices in which Rousseff was not really involved.<sup>4</sup>

After Rousseff’s impeachment,<sup>5</sup> there was a belief amongst the centre-right parties, mainly those that were part of Michel Temer’s government (Rousseff’s vice-president), that the political crisis could be overcome after the PT left office. However, several corruption scandals were disclosed during the two years of Temer’s administration, involving many of his ministers and even the President himself. Such scandals generated an overall perception of lack of credibility amongst the population not only concerning Temer’s government but also concerning mainstream politics in the country.

It is within a grave economic moment and a profound crisis of political credibility that Bolsonarism was considered by voters as a political alternative. Yet even at this point it was still not clear that Bolsonaro would be elected President in the 2018 election. His election was not anticipated by a single political scientist even as the electoral race began. It was expected that the result of the election first round would once again be a replica of Brazilian electoral pattern since the 1994 Presidential election dispute between the PT and the PSDB. Nonetheless, the pattern changed, and my objective, from now on, is to introduce the Bolsonarist articulation responsible for changing it.

The 2018 electoral campaign divided the Brazilian society into two main antagonistic discourses: Lulism and Bolsonarism. Lula had the opportunity to return to the Presidency after Rousseff’s

impeachment. Nonetheless, Lula, the PT's candidate who led all polls, was convicted and imprisoned as one of the most drastic results of Operation Car Wash in a casuistic and questionable judicial proceeding, which prevented him from running for President. Fernando Haddad, the former mayor of São Paulo city, replaced him as the party candidate.

Therefore, Bolsonarism appeared as a new and unpredictable political force. Strictly speaking, Bolsonaro would not be elected President except for in the gravest of circumstances. Not only because of the Brazilian electoral pattern since 1994 but also, and mostly, because of who Bolsonaro is. He was considered as a caricatural backbencher at the Chamber of Deputies who supported the military dictatorship (1964-1985), along with his sexist, racist, and homophobic positions, until the beginning of the protests for Rousseff's impeachment in 2015. Such reactionary behaviour, under normal political conditions, would not position Bolsonaro as a potential electoral option. However, considering the adverse political and economic scenario of 2018, Bolsonarist radicalism appeared as a synonym for order for the majority of the electorate.

Looking specifically at the Bolsonarist discursive articulation, I divide it into three main axes: moral, economic, and judicial. The moral axis is the most conservative and overt part of the Bolsonarist discourse compared to the others. This axis appears in Bolsonaro's speeches and the acts of his followers daily in an attempt to mould Brazilian society into a unique and conservative moral pattern. Even considering that there is no specific plan for it, such a pattern consists mostly in recovering the "Christian values" threatened by years of left governments. In this regard, since the 2018 electoral campaign Bolsonaro has been receiving support from influential sectors and leaders of Protestant churches. Such support from the conservative wing of the Brazilian Protestantism, which is the majority of these religions, cannot be ignored. Despite the 64.4 per cent of Brazilians being Catholic, according to the last Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) census conducted in 2010, Protestantism has grown 61.45 per cent in ten years, representing 22.2 per cent of the population (GI 2012).

Bolsonaro is fully aware of the importance of Pentecostalism in Brazil and, more importantly, the potential 42 million supporters for his conservative policies. In doing so, the President has appointed protestants as ministers of state in his government. The President also intends to propose someone "terribly evangelical" for the next available seat on the Supreme Court, justifying such a specific characteristic by saying that "the state is secular, but we are Christians" (Gortázar 2019).

Bolsonarist moral axis threatens different social advances in Brazilian society achieved in the last decades under progressive governments. With a narrative in defence of family, moral, and good manners, Bolsonarism advocates against the social and cultural plurality and using the state apparatus to profess conservative Christian principles. For instance, Damare Alves, the Minister of Woman, Family and Human Rights and one of the most popular amongst Bolsonaro's ministers, openly uses the structure of the ministry to fight against what Bolsonarism calls "gender ideology" (Hancock 2019).<sup>6</sup>

The economic axis of Bolsonarism is constituted from an articulation with the global and domestic markets, established mainly from the run-off for the Presidential election. This articulation was difficult to predict. Bolsonaro, as a member of parliament, usually assumed political positions associated with the state intervention in the economy. For example, he voted several times against projects of pension

reform, and also against important projects of privatisation in the telecommunications and oil sectors in the 1990s (Landim and Lima 2018).

What made possible the articulation between Bolsonaro and the markets was his previous approach to Paulo Guedes, a liberal educated at the University of Chicago with considerable experience in financial markets and co-founder of BTG Pactual, one of the biggest Brazilian investment banks (Phillips 2018). Guedes became Bolsonaro's minister of the economy which has been considered positive by markets: it marked a turn towards the privatisation of companies and other state reforms seen as crucial according to the liberal agenda.

The judicial axis gave Bolsonaro the most significant support since the Presidential campaign. Such an axis marked the appearance and inclusion of the "good citizens" within Bolsonarism. As mentioned, such members of the middle and upper classes became subjects of media anti-corruption discourse during the PT governments. Since the 2006 Presidential election, they have usually voted for the PSDB - the main opposition against Lulism. Nonetheless, in 2018, those votes changed to Bolsonaro.

Despite the importance of the two previous axes for Bolsonaro's election and also for the governmental support, the judicial axis is Bolsonarism's main face, symbolised by a singular nodal point: "anti-corruption". The Bolsonarist discourse assumed a kind of republican morality not only against Lulism but also against the political system as a whole. For the majority of the Brazilian voters, Bolsonaro became someone able to lead Brazil to a new political reality beyond the corrupt one. At this point, a sort of "legal messianism" meant the judicial axis meets the moral one. Hence, "under the eyes of God" and also "under a ruthless Justice", which is blind and for all, Bolsonaro appeared as the moralist alternative in a political scenario suffering a severe crisis.

A recent character was crucial to bear such a Bolsonarist judicial axis: Sérgio Moro, the judge responsible for adjudicating the processes investigated by Operation Car Wash. Thinking in accordance with Laclau and Mouffe's perspective, if the corruption issue was perceived as one of the gravest threats against which the Bolsonarist discourse has been articulated, Moro's name appeared as the empty signifier which marked the solution. The judge and the prosecutors involved in Operation Car Wash became highly popular people in the country, seen by the media and public opinion as those who would finally bring justice to a corrupt Brazilian politics.

After his election, Bolsonaro invited Moro to be justice minister. Once the judge accepted the ministry, Bolsonarism reached a hegemonic position to speak in the name of justice and law, which consolidated the support from the "good citizens", media, and public opinion. In this regard, on 1st November 2018, Bolsonaro published on his Twitter personal account the following: "The federal judge Sérgio Moro accepted our invitation to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security. His anti-organised crime and anti-corruption agenda, as well as the respect for the Constitution and laws will be our north" (GI 2018).<sup>7</sup>

Now it is time to make more transparent my critique concerning the characteristic of "the people" necessarily as "the underdogs" present in Laclau's work. Such a characteristic does not fit well in the case of Bolsonarism as follows.

First, the Bolsonarist discourse has all the elements that would characterise it as a case of far-right populism. It is a broad articulation amongst demands organised from the three main axes

described above. All of these axes, for different reasons, had Lulism as the main antagonist pole. In this respect, the moral axis considered the progressive policies of the PT governments as a threat to the “Christian values” of Brazilian society, and the economic one perceived the state intervention in the economy as a menace to the interests of domestic and international markets.

However, neither of these two axes, in the context of the 2018 election, could assume the hegemonic role within the Bolsonaroist articulation when considering the conditions of possibility of that moment. It was the judicial axis that assumed such a role in the chain of equivalence of Bolsonaroism as the anti-corruption demand. Corruption has been an endemic feature of the Brazilian politics and, consequently, part of its political culture. Nonetheless, during the PT governments, such an issue moved to another level, when two big corruption schemes were disclosed, the “Mensalão”, in 2005, and the “Petrolão”, in 2014. Different from previous corruption scandals, Brazilian media gave broad coverage to these. Considering that in both scandals there was involvement of public servants, businessmen and politicians of different political parties, the media’s coverage was remarkably associated with PT members. Summarizing, in 2018, as Brazil was going through severe political and economic crises, the media insistence on making the PT the scapegoat of the corruption issue for years and years finally worked.

The combat against “the corruption of the PT” became a powerful empty signifier in that dislocated context. At the same time, Bolsonaro emerged as the best leader within the right camp capable of eradicating corruption and “restoring” the public morality lost during the years of PT in government. Stating this, my point now is to highlight the people within the Bolsonaroist far-right discourse. In that scenario, “the people” assumed the face of the “good citizens”, those who, as previously mentioned, came from the middle and upper classes. Bolsonaro became the political alternative for “the good citizens”, and this signifier assumed the representation of the whole discursive articulation.

The “good citizen”, the one who demanded, in a very selective way the end of the “corruption of the PT”, became the empty signifier within the Bolsonaroist discourse. The effects of this empty signifier are evident, as the “good citizen” became not only the white, well-educated and member of the economic elite but also the representation of Bolsonaroism as such. Thus, being a “good citizen” also meant they would defend the Brazilian “Christian values”, which were threatened by the PT’s communist ideas, and support the free market, menaced by an intervening and corrupt state.

Considering the particular conditions of emergence in 2018, the “good citizen” became the empty signifier that made Bolsonaroism possible. The people within the Bolsonaroist discourse are not, symbolically, the oppressed ones; but rather the middle-class citizen who, selectively, called for the “end of corruption”. Therefore, Bolsonaroism is a *sui generis* populist experience, in which elitist and conservative demands were articulated, constituting not “the people as the underdog”, but the people *against* the underdogs – because in recent Brazilian political history, PT has been the party of the poor.

## Bolsonarist Violence in Pandemic Times

We are now in a position to discuss Bolsonaro's violent policy regarding the coronavirus pandemic. At the moment this paragraph is written, more than 160,000 Brazilians have passed away because of COVID-19. Unfortunately, such a regrettable number of lost lives is much more than the result of a lethal virus; it is also a consequence of a series of political decisions taken by a callous government concerning this public health tragedy. Therefore, this last section argues that the coronavirus crisis has been one example, definitely the most dramatic one, of the political and social impacts of a far-right type of populism driven by *egopolitical* behaviour.

To begin with, it is crucial to highlight how Bolsonaro has understood the pandemic. His comprehension of it has a direct relation to his decisions as the President. Bolsonaro has systematically denied the gravity of the COVID-19. In March 2020, when the first wave of the pandemic was felt in Brazil, Bolsonaro stated that the power of the virus was being "overrated" (BBC News Brasil 2020). Just a few days later, when the country recorded more than ten deaths caused by the disease, he compared the coronavirus to "a little flu" or just "a cold". In this same opportunity, he also said that "in my particular case, because of my background as an athlete, I wouldn't need to worry if I was infected by the virus" (Phillips 2020b). It might seem odd to hear from the very President that "a little flu" would not compromise his excellent health due to his "background as an athlete", but, in the case of Bolsonaro, this is not unrelated to the way he understands politics. For him, as an ideal type of *egopolitician*, politics is always a private matter. In other words, the way he is personally affected by some issue, in this particular case by the coronavirus, is the best parameter by which to take political decisions.

Considering such an *egopolitical* parameter, what was Bolsonaro's primary concern with the coronavirus pandemic? The answer to this question reveals the reason for his insensitive behaviour concerning the pandemic and also his violent attitudes and words when he had to face reality and the consequences of the disease.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Bolsonaro's primary concern was to fight against the necessary measures to limit the circulation of the virus, such as the lockdown of cities or regions. For him, such measures would damage the ongoing but still incipient Brazilian economic recovery. As a result, the President has since then assumed a discursive position that has divided the society into two antagonistic camps. On the one hand, there are those who claim that people have to stay at home which would, as a consequence, damage the economy; on the other, are those who understand that life needs to continue as normal, as the coronavirus would be fatal only for older people. Within the context of such a false Bolsonarist dichotomy between saving lives and saving the economy, Bolsonaro has preferred the second alternative.

When addressing the nation on television, on 24 March 2020, the President put himself "almost against everything and everyone" concerning the pandemic crisis (TV BrasilGov 2020). During his speech, Bolsonaro displayed an insensitive and ignorant political position regarding the gravity of the situation in the world, as we were witnessing the enormous number of deaths in Italy and Spain. Bolsonaro isolated himself politically and gave rise to a discourse against the WHO recommendations

and scientific knowledge. In the domestic context, the situation was the same: Bolsonaro has assumed a political position against the majority of the state governors, the Supreme Court, and also the media.

Why did Bolsonaro assume such an isolated position? There are many reasons to be considered in answering this question, and it is hard to articulate them in a coherent discourse. One may say that the primary reason for the Brazilian President to assume such an unreasonable and anti-science position is that, since the very first day of his government, Bolsonaro has been campaigning for his re-election. It is common to hear from him that he desires to rule until 2026 (Uribe 2019) and, therefore, he should keep his far-right discourse, which pleases his most devoted followers.

However, it is crucial to say that such radical followers represent no more than 10 or 12 percent of voters, which was, obviously, insufficient to elect Bolsonaro in 2018 and to support his plan for re-election in 2022. However, Bolsonaro also has about 20 percent of voters who have been supporting his government since day one. In sum, Bolsonaro has an electoral base of around one-third of the Brazilian voters, which is still insufficient for his main goal. Nonetheless, it is a fundamental base from which Bolsonarism departs towards the 50 per cent of the electorate needed in the next Presidential race.

The second possibility for Bolsonaro's COVID-19 position is intrinsically linked to the first. I have just mentioned that the President maintains around one-third of voters on his political base that follow him for his confrontational discourse. Analysing his discourse through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), one may say that it maintains a permanently antagonistic strategy, which represents the privilege of the logic of equivalence over the logic of difference. In other words, as Bolsonaro is continuously in a political campaign, he also has to emphasize the presence of the enemy.

Generally speaking, the enemies are always the same: the left and other progressive forces, scientific knowledge, legal constraints, democratic institutions, and so on. On COVID-19, the specific enemies are the left parties, the media, the WHO and the scientists who are using the pandemic to prevent him from ruling the country. Bolsonaro's paranoid fantasy prevents him from understanding that COVID-19 is not "a bit of a cold", but it is a severe disease against which one has to take serious measures. For the Brazilian President, the political world is relatively simple: if the PT and the "anti-Trump" WHO ostensibly work to combat the virus, he has necessarily to be on the other side of the antagonistic frontier.

Such a delusional and antagonistic behaviour is not only part of Bolsonaro's *egopolitical* attitude, but it is also an essential characteristic of Bolsonarism discourse. Bolsonarists have always expected a confrontational attitude from the President. For them, especially for the most intolerant, Bolsonaro's violence and insensitiveness regarding any issue are justified as it is the only way to eliminate the antagonist threat against the world imagined by Bolsonarist discourse. Bolsonaro is like a fearless warrior leading a crusade for the Christian values menaced by the left and atheism.

Bolsonaro's self-interest concerning his re-election and also the Bolsonarist antagonistic behaviour regarding enemies (never adversaries), had to find an alternative to "combat" the COVID-19, and such an answer was given by the use of the hydroxychloroquine, a medicine usually prescribed for malaria treatment. However, according to present scientific knowledge (e.g. EMS 2020), there is no evidence that this medicine is effective against coronavirus.

Nevertheless, it does not really matter for Bolsonarism. This *egopolitical* way of dealing with the disease, at the same time ignoring and discrediting scientific evidence, is usual in the Bolsonarist strategy. As an *egopolitics* attitude always follows private interests, misinformation and fake news are common strategies used, added by the fantasy that the individual will, and not the established institutions, is enough to build an uncorrupted and better world.

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Since Plato, one knows that a tyrant, before the emergence of tyranny, promises redemption to his followers. However, it takes only a few paragraphs further on the “The Republic” to understand precisely the opposite. The great merit of classical Greece was not to solve the always insoluble political matters but just to present them. From the heights of Acropolis, the Greeks mock us.

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## NOTES

1. I will not address here the economic reasons that influence *egopolitical* behaviour. However, *egopolitics* is a consequence of the colonization of the political system by the neoliberal economy. In this sense, *egopolitics* is characterized as a way of maximizing private gains in a context where the public interest should be prioritized. Perhaps the beginning of contemporary *egopolitical* behaviour was anticipated by Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), particularly in his analysis of “audience democracy”.
2. Such a task is the main objective of a chapter recently published (Mendonça and Linhares, 2020).
3. Dilma Rousseff has been re-elected with more than 51 percent of votes against around 48 per cent for Aécio Neves (PSDB): “Brazil Election Result: Meet the Voters,” *BBC News*, 27 October, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-29785043>.
4. Organizations like “Movimento Brasil Livre” (“Free Brazil Movement”) coordinated massive protests between 2015 and 2016, to claim Rousseff’s impeachment, to blame the PT for the crimes of corruption at Petrobras, and to support the Operation Car Wash.
5. There is a hegemonic position amongst the most reputable Brazilian political scientists that Rousseff’s impeachment was the result of a coup d’état (Avritzer 2019; Miguel 2019; Santos 2017), a position which I share with them.
6. The term “gender ideology” was created by a conservative wing of the Catholic Church in the 1990s as a reaction against feminism. See: Renata Matarazzo and Gabriela Gonçalves, “Saiba Como o Termo ‘Ideologia de Gênero’ Surgiu e é Debatido,” *GI*, 3rd September, 2019, <https://gi.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2019/09/03/saiba-como-o-termo-ideologia-de-genero-surgiu-e-e-debatido.ghtml>.
7. In April 2020, Sergio Moro resigned from Bolsonaro government “after clashing with the president over Bolsonaro’s sacking of the head of Brazil’s federal police”. Tom Phillips, “Brazil’s Star Justice Minister Sergio Moro Resigns in Blow to Jair Bolsonaro,” *The Guardian*, 2020a, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/brazil-justice-minister-sergio-moro-resigns-jair-bolsonaro>. (Accessed 25 September 2020).

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